

“Going Back and Forth without Leaving”: Re-examining Nigeria-Israel Relations, 1970-1999

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Abstract

The experience of the Nigerian Civil War brought a new attitude in the country's external front. Nigeria learnt some important lesson that survival in international relations rested more on 'interest' and less on 'ideology'. Hence, it began to shift alliances and sought for new friendships that would guarantee important diplomatic relations and economic cooperation necessary for its continued independent existence in the face of unpredictable undercurrents of ideologically polarized world. Israel was one of the new destinations for Nigeria; hence, important relations endured between the two countries afterwards. However, the problem that engages this paper stems from the fact that many scholars appeared to have explained this relation in the period under review only in the perspective of Nigeria's severance of diplomatic ties with the State of Israel. Therefore, the paper re-examines the country's relations with the State of Israel between the 1970s and 1990s. It explores the country's enduring elements and foreign policy interests that predicated the relation. It does not only highlight the diplomatic shifts that characterized the relations but discusses some important bilateral exchanges and cooperation between the two countries. The paper, thus, argues that Nigeria's severance of diplomatic relation (high politics) with the State of Israel did not stop other forms of relations between the two countries: there were some enduring and beneficial economic exchanges and cooperation (low politics) that continued between the two countries, particularly as it related to Nigeria's development needs. The paper adopts the qualitative method of research and uses thematic historical method in its analysis. It draws its source of information mainly from documents and press releases in government archives, books, journal articles, and newspaper publications.

Keywords: Nigeria, Israel, Diplomatic Relations, Interest, and Foreign Policy.

Introduction

Although Nigeria's relations with Israel actually began before the country's political independence with the governments of Western and Eastern Regions having earlier established some kind of relations with the Israel, it was formalized at independence in 1960 with Tel Aviv opening its embassy in Lagos the same year. Though, the authorities in Lagos could not reciprocally open a Nigerian Embassy in Tel Aviv, robust bilateral diplomatic and economic ties involving cooperation in important areas of mutual interest between the two countries began to cautiously flourish. A number of technical and loan assistance agreements involving manpower training and expertise exchange were contracted with Israel, and Israeli firms in the area of infrastructure construction, distributive trade, agriculture went into serious investment business in Nigeria.

The event of Nigeria-Biafra War temporarily changed the dialectics of the relations. The focus of the relation shifted to efforts to get and supply military weapons and logistics for prosecution of the war in the face of official refusal by the United States and Britain to supply arms to Lagos. With shifting of alliances after the war, Nigeria did not only see new convictions to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, but engaged Tel Aviv for important trade, investment and development cooperation that would help advance the country's economy and society. There were occasional differences between Lagos and Tel Aviv on the happenings in the Middle East as they related to Palestinian question which somewhat informed hostile perception of Israel in the pro-Islamic Northern parts of Nigeria. However, this did not stop continued flow of the relations and Nigeria, officially, continued to maintain neutrality in the Arab-Israeli issues over Palestine.

However, Lagos broke diplomatic ties with the Tel Aviv in 1973 with the event of Israeli war against the Arab states over Palestine, and could not re-establish diplomatic relations until in 1992.¹ The diplomatic severance complexed the country's relations with the State of Israel. Many took it that there existed no form of relations between the two countries as the fuss of severance of diplomatic relation overshadowed other channels and forms of relations that existed between the two countries. According to O. Chidozie, "interstate relations is much more

than political-diplomatic relation. Closing of embassies or suspending mutual agreements may not necessarily stop the flow of trade, investment, technology and other exchanges".² In other words, diplomatic relations constitute an aspect of the gamut of relations between and amongst nations. Nigeria, thus, not only related with Israel diplomatically and politically but as well economic and culturally; and the relations were not only conducted on government-to-government level but also people-to-people. Hence, B. Akinterinwa argues that the country's foreign policy towards Israel under successive Nigerian governments reflected varying priorities that are not only ideological, political and diplomatic, but strategic and economic in nature.³

This paper, therefore, re-examines Nigeria's relations with the State of Israel between 1970 and 1999. The focus on this period is informed by the evident situation in the Nigeria external front at the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 up to the end of military rule in 1999. It does not only recenter the problem of diplomatic severance in the relations but, as well, brings to the fore the other unseen forms of relations that went on in the period. The paper is thematically organized into four major themes: having set out the background in the introduction, it highlights Nigeria-Israel relations in the first decade after the Nigeria-Biafra; and in the main, examines the relations during the Second Republic; and during the military era up to 1999.

Nigeria and Israel in the First Decade after the Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian Civil War marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's history, leading to a re-evaluation of the country's foreign policy priorities. At the onset of the war, there were clandestine attempts by the Israeli government to aid the Biafrans even though they openly profess friendship with the Nigerian state.⁴ For instance, there were reports that the Israeli government were rendering aids to the government of the defunct Biafran state, and that Israel had expressed dissatisfaction over the stoppage of flights into all the territories of Eastern Nigeria by the Nigerian government. The report stated that Mr. Abba Eban; Israeli Foreign Minister told the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) that Israel was going to increase her aids to the Nigerian secessionists as part of her efforts to take part in any international effort to alleviate the suffering of the peoples of Eastern Nigeria.⁵ However, a press release by the Israeli Embassy in Lagos stated that Israel had no intentions of interfering in the internal politics and affairs of Nigeria or that of Africa for that matter. He remarked that the resolution of the Nigerian conflict was within the jurisdiction of the OAU. Also, Mr. Ram Nirgad, Israeli ambassador to Nigeria reaffirmed Israel's support of the government of Nigeria led by Major-General Gowon that they were going to continue to respect Nigeria's territorial integrity.⁶ Mr. Ben Yaacov also advanced that Israel had no particular stake in the war, but only intended to alleviate the sufferings of the people.

The Nigerian Civil War was seen by the Nigerian state as critical to the existence of Nigeria and so was ready to sever relations with nations that supported or aided the secession of the Biafra state. Perhaps this implies that Nigeria's severance of diplomatic ties with Israel was an evil waiting to happen which eventually did happen in 1973. Nigeria-Israel relations in the first republic was shaped by a mixture of cooperation, mutual benefits, and tension.

In 1970, M.D Bakare, the President of Lagos City Transport Union, S.O. Ezuigbe of the Ministry of Works and Transport, Benin and G.O. Oyelemi, the Secretary of Agriculture and Allied Workers Union, Ibadan returned from Israel where they attended the economic conference organized by the Afro-Asian Institute for Co-operative and Labour Studies. The institute has contributed immensely to the training of top functionaries of the Nigerian Trade Union and Co-operative Societies. The Israeli Trade Union who are the organisers of the training was set to boost economic development in Africa and Asia through the activities of trade unions and co-operative societies in those nations.⁷ In 1971, seven Nigerian government officials selected from the various government ministries of trade and industry attended and completed a three and half months' labour and cooperative course in Israel at the Afro-Asia Institute for Co-operative and Labour Studies which was the institute's 23rd international course. The Nigerian participants were David Soyombo, Earnest Famewo, J.B Jegede, J.A. Lagunju, M.O. Oladeji, J.O. Odunuga and F.E. Efobi. They were trained in matters dealing with the functions of Labour and cooperation in Social and Economic Development as well as on other 34 courses held at the request of the nations.⁸ In 1971, Mr. Yunus Kaltungo; and Mr. Ezekiel O.A. Odeyemi President and the Acting Secretary General of the United Labour Congress of Nigeria (ULCN) jointly appealed to the Histadrut (Israel General Federation of Labour) for a cooperation between the Labour unions of both nations for their economic advancement.⁹

Also in 1971, Nigeria approached Israel for technical training for young persons between ages 15 and 25 in a programme it termed National Youth Service Organisation. The intent was to help train these young persons in technical skills in real working conditions and to build in them a healthy working attitude with regards to labour according to the Four Years Development Plan. In 1972, the feasibility study for the project was completed leading to about twenty Nigerians travelling to Israel for training. About 1000 Nigerians were trained between 1960 when the programme began unofficially and 1973 with other 300 Israeli sent to Nigeria under the Israel technological

assistance to Nigeria.¹⁰ On the 23rd of June 1971, a new association, Nigeria/Israeli Friendship Association was formed in Ibadan, Nigeria with the aim of fostering friendly relations with both countries. The pioneers of the association clarified that the association was not a political or ideological association but was formed to encourage co-operation between both nations in the fields of education, commerce, agriculture, trade, transport, and industry. The pioneer president and secretary of the association were Mr. A.T. Oyewo and Mr. Olu Adebajo respectively.¹¹ It should be noted that during the 19-year period of the severance of Nigeria-Israel relations, the organisation continued to exist and held its regular meetings. The association during this period performed as an advocacy group for the restoration of relations between both nations. As a matter of fact, the organisation was among the few advocates that championed the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel.

The Military government of General Yakubu Gowon however took a more pro-Arab stance, largely in response to the growing influence of the Organization of African Unity and the Organization of the Islamic Conference in the region. This shift was further solidified in 1973 when Nigeria severed diplomatic ties with Israel in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War. The Gowon administration's decision to cut ties with Israel was driven by a combination of factors. Firstly, the government sought to align itself with the broader political and ideological trends within the OAU and the OIC, which were increasingly dominated by pro-Arab and anti-Israeli sentiments. Secondly, the Gowon regime viewed the strengthening of ties with the Arab world as a means of enhancing Nigeria's regional and global influence, as well as securing economic and diplomatic support from the oil-rich Arab states.¹²

The next major shift in Nigeria-Israel relations came during the military regime of General Murtala Mohammed, who came to power in 1975 after a coup that overthrew the Gowon government. The Mohammed administration adopted a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy, recognizing the potential benefits of maintaining balanced relations with both the Arab states and Israel. However, the Mohammed regime's tenure was cut short by his assassination in 1976, and it was left to his successor, General Olusegun Obasanjo, to navigate the delicate task of managing Nigeria's relations with both Israel and the Arab states.

The Obasanjo administration, which ruled from 1976 to 1979, maintained a largely pro-Arab stance, further solidifying Nigeria's commitment to the Palestinian cause and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This was evident in the government's refusal to reestablish diplomatic ties with Israel, despite the potential economic and technological benefits that such a move could have brought. The Obasanjo regime's approach to Nigeria-Israel relations was heavily influenced by the government's desire to maintain its influence within the OAU, as well as its concerns about the potential backlash from the Arab world if it were to reestablish ties with Israel. Additionally, the regime's ideological and political leanings, which were more aligned with the anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist sentiments prevalent in the broader African and Third World movements, further reinforced its reluctance to engage with Israel.¹³

The severance of diplomatic relations with Israel, however, did not entirely preclude all forms of engagement between the two countries. Israeli's response to the severance of ties was by implementing a series of measures aimed at re-establishing relations with Nigeria. One such measure was the establishment of a secret diplomatic channel between the two countries.¹⁴ This channel allowed for informal discussions and negotiations between Israeli and Nigerian officials, paving the way for future reconciliation. Additionally, Israel increased its economic aid and diplomatic assistance to Nigeria, particularly in the areas of agriculture and healthcare. Despite the occasional rift, various forms of covert and informal cooperation continued to exist. Also, although Nigeria broke diplomatic relations with Israel, the Jews were, however, not barred from engaging in trading and economic activities with Nigeria and Nigerians.

Nigeria's Relations with Israel in the Second Republic

Nigeria's relations with Israel under president Shehu Shagari's administration underwent through significant changes and faced some daunting challenges. The Shagari administration inherited a relationship that had been strained during the previous military regimes from Yakubu Gowon to Murtala/Obasanjo era. The military regimes before Shagari had taken a strong pro-Arab and anti-Israeli stance, cutting diplomatic ties with Israel in 1973 as a result of the Yom Kippur. This move was seen as a political strategy to gain the support of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab world.¹⁵

On assumption of office, President Shehu Shagari sought to reestablish diplomatic ties with Israel, recognizing the potential benefits of maintaining relations with both the Arab nations and Israel simultaneously. This was a delicate balancing act, as Nigeria's membership in the OAU and the Organization of the Islamic Conference required the maintenance of a certain level of solidarity with the Arab states. Shagari's approach was to pursue a policy of "even-handedness" towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, seeking to maintain positive relations with both

sides. This involved initiating the process of restoring diplomatic ties with Israel while, also, reaffirming Nigeria's commitment to the Palestinian cause and its support for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.¹⁶ One of the key factors that influenced Shagari administration's decision to reestablish ties with Israel was the potential economic and technological benefits that such a relationship could bring to Nigeria. Israel was seen as a source of expertise and technology, particularly in the areas of agriculture, water management, and security. The Shagari administration hoped to leverage this expertise to address some of Nigeria's pressing developmental challenges.

For instance, Nigeria's Foreign Minister in an official visit to Israel in 1981 stated that some about 2500 Israeli businessmen were in Nigeria within the period of the severance of diplomatic ties.¹⁷ Also, the Gongola states continued business transactions with Israeli firms. The construction of the Gongola state secretariat which was worth 44.2 million naira in Yola was done by Israeli companies while the transportation of the materials for the construction was from Haifa Port in Israel to Port Harcourt by Flemington Development Nigeria Limited and Zim Israel Navigation Company Limited respectively.¹⁸ Imo State Government in 1982 also negotiated a loan of N78 million from Israel which was to be used to finance accelerated rural water schemes.¹⁹ Other Israeli companies that continued business with Nigeria were, Afro Continental Nigeria Ltd, an engineering company, Aprofin Nigeria Ltd, Reynolds Construction Company (RCC), Read and Building Company, Dizengoff Nigeria Ltd, among others. In what Olajide Aluko termed continuity in relationships, Nigerians and Israel continued during the period of severance, however, not officially.²⁰

During the 19 years of severance of diplomatic relations with Israel, two Nigerian royal fathers; the Ooni of Ife Oba Okumade Sijuwade Olubuse II, and the Emir of Kano Ado Bayero visited Israel specifically on the 18th of August 1984. The Cabinet Office in Lagos issued a statement announcing the Emir's removal as the Chancellor of University of Ibadan to be succeeded by the Oba of Benin, Omo N'Oba Erediauwa. In his home state, the governor of Kano, Commodore Hamzat Abdullahi suspended him for six months as the chairman of the state's Council of Chiefs and his passport was impounded by the Nigerian Security Organisation (NSO). He was to be confined to Kano for six months. In Ibadan, Oyo state, Governor Lt-Col Popoola stated that the Ooni of Ife was suspended for six months as the Chairman of the state's council of traditional rulers and that he was to be confined to the state for six months as well with his passport seized. It was stated that the visit was an embarrassment to the federal government who had severed diplomatic relations with Israel since 1973.²¹

However, the restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel was not without its challenges. The move was met with criticisms from some segments of the Nigerian public, who saw it as a betrayal of the country's support for the Palestinian cause. Additionally, the Arab states, particularly those in the OIC, were wary of Nigeria's balancing act and sought to pressure the government to take a more pro-Arab stance. Despite these challenges, the Shagari administration pursued a pragmatic approach in Nigeria-Israeli relations. Nigeria's participation in the OIC summits and deliberations, and reaffirmation of the country's support for the Palestinian cause while, also, engaging in various economic and technological exchanges with the state of Israel. The Shagari administration's approach to Nigeria-Israel relations set the stage for future engagement between the two countries. The restoration of diplomatic ties paved the way for increased economic and technological cooperation, as well as the development of security and intelligence-sharing initiatives.²²

Overall, the Shagari administration's approach to Nigeria-Israel relations was a complex and often contentious one, marked by the need to balance competing interests and navigate a delicate political landscape. While the administration's efforts to pursue a policy of "even-handedness" were not without their challenges, they laid the path for future engagement between the two countries.

Nigeria-Israel Relations under the Military Regimes up to 1999

No doubt Nigeria-Israeli relations was characterized by significant shifts reflecting the varying ideological and strategic foreign policy priorities of the successive Nigerian military governments. The military coup that overthrew the Shagari government in 1983, led by General Muhammadu Buhari, ushered in a new era of uncertainty in Nigeria-Israel relations. The Buhari regime, which was characterized by its rigid ideological stance and its strong anti-corruption rhetoric, initially maintained a cautious approach towards Israel, neither severing ties nor actively pursuing deeper engagement. However, the subsequent military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, which came to power in 1985, marked a significant shift in Nigeria's foreign policy towards Israel. The Babangida administration, driven by its pragmatic and strategic approach to international relations, sought to reestablish and deepen ties with Israel.

As part of the restoration moves, in August 1991, Israeli Prime Minister; Mr. Yitzhak Shamir received in Jerusalem the Nigerian Foreign Minister; Major-General Ike Nwachukwu who was on a special mission to deliver a message from Nigeria's military president; General Ibrahim Babangida on the resumption of cooperation and diplomatic relations with Israel.²³ This formal diplomatic reunion between both nations was signed by Major

General Ike Nwachukwu and Mr. David Levy; both Foreign Ministers of Nigeria and Israel respectively. Both nations made firm agreements for the exchange of ambassadors in both nations.

Note that between 1960 and 1973 when Nigeria-Israel relations began, although the Israeli government had a foreign office in Lagos, Nigeria with an ambassador, Nigeria never had an ambassador in Tel Aviv. Major-General Nwachukwu, and the Director of the Israeli Fuel Corporation Ltd., Deleck Company, Mr. Abraham Argon in Tel Aviv also established an economic partnership in the energy industry. Mr. Argon noted that Israel's annual crude oil consumption was about 11 million tones part of which was going to be purchased from Nigeria at the re-establishment of relations. He further stated that Israel was as well going to benefit from Nigeria's coal production to supplement her energy industry.²⁴ The re-establishment of the Nigerian-Israeli relations was solidified with the posting of Mr. Gilboa Moshe as the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria in 1992 and Mr. Ignatius Olisaemeka posted as Nigeria's first ever ambassador to Tel Aviv. Israeli ambassador to Nigeria; Mr. Golan Gadi (1994-1998) stated that his nation's bilateral relations with Nigeria would revolve around agriculture with the Israeli intentions to raise to the income level of the small holder Nigerian farmers through training in Israeli agricultural courses especially in the areas of fish farming, plants and Israeli private agricultural initiatives.²⁵

According to *ISRAELIGHT: Israel-Nigeria Cooperation in Agriculture*, in April 1993 a group of Israeli delegates led by Dr. Oded Sagoe paid a visit to Plateau state, Nigeria with the aim to improving agriculture in the state in the areas of cattle rearing, poultry production, yam production, potato farming, citrus fruits and flowers. In 1996, Dr. Moshe Wolfovitch, a renowned Israeli mushroom grower visited Nigeria to carry out some feasibility studies on the possibility of a Nigeria-Israel cooperation in mushroom production. In August 1996, the government of Israel led by Ambassador Gadi led a team of Israeli experts Mr. Chaim Ethan and Mr. Ami Maimise in collaboration with the National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Service (NAERLS) and the Federal Department of Forestry, Abuja organized a 2-week workshop on Modern Beekeeping Technology in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Among the Nigerian participants were members of the public sector, scholars, investors, entrepreneurs, bankers, farmers, and traditional rulers among others. Two weeks after the Zaria workshop, the Western region edition of the workshop was organized at the University of Ibadan where the host University, Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomso and the Beekeepers Association of Nigeria collaborated to make the event successful. In 1997, the Israeli embassy in Nigeria in conjunction with the Afforestation Programme Coordinating Unit (APCU) organised a desertification workshop in Kano state. The programme was attended by 30 participants from the extension workers of the neighbouring Northern states. The aim of the workshop was to enable Nigeria combat the desert encroachment challenge in the Northern part of the country and the production of crops in arid regions of Nigeria.²⁶

Agricultural projects and research in institutions constitute the major aspect of Israel foreign cooperation programmes. Emphasis is placed on training courses agricultural projects with about 1, 400 participants from over 80 countries including Nigeria attending the specialized farming courses annually. In 1994, about 3000 participants received trainings in their own countries among which Nigeria was one. In February, 1997, a group of Israeli experts led by Prof. Hermen S. and Dr. Elliot Birnbaum visited Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka to inaugurate a Biotechnology laboratory. The USAID co-sponsored project was aimed at the mass production of yam. The team had visited some Nigerian universities among which was University of Lagos where they conducted trainings on Biotechnology and National Development. Israel also hosted an agricultural fair in 1999 tagged 'Agritech 99' which coincided with the President Olusegun Obasanjo's launch of agricultural revolution in Nigeria. Nigeria actively participated in this fair where the participants were taught how modern technology could be employed in agriculture for improved and greater yields. Israel participated in the Lagos International Trade Fair on November 9, 1993, which was chosen as Israel's day. During the fair businessmen from both nations exchanged useful business ideas about trade and investment. Israel in 1997 participated in the 9th OAU/AEC All African Trade Fair held in Kaduna, Nigeria. There, Israeli ambassador to Nigeria, Mr. Golan Gadi gave support to 10 Israeli companies that took part in the display of Israel technology especially in agriculture. Israeli companies at the fair were Agrited, S & D Farms, EMI Systems, EBM Systems, Lordmart, Tahal, Agrifruit, Agrovaat and Dizengoff. This is the second African trade fair that Israel participated in after it took part in the 1993 edition of the fair where it bagged the first position for foreign participation.²⁷

Five years after the restoration of Nigeria-Israel relations, precisely on 22nd May 1997, the Junior Club of the Uzomiri Study Centre in Enugu received an Israeli award of computers, books and educational materials from the Israeli embassy on the behalf of the Israeli government. This was a reward for their success in the Children of the World Draw Jerusalem competition organized in Israel to mark the 3000 years anniversary of King David's conquest of Jerusalem.²⁸ Israel has been involved in supply of technical equipment, teaching aids, and specialists in agriculture to various tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

According to *ISRAELIGHT: 50 Years of Democracy in Israel*, in September 1998 the Charge d'Affaires of the Israeli Embassy, Mr. Yaron Sideman made book presentations and reference materials from Israel on various subjects to Adazi-Nnukwu Community Library, Anambra State. The Adama of Adazi-Nnukwu, Igwe Ojiako III alongside the members of the Council of Chiefs was available to receive the presentation and further expressed his gratitude to the government of Israel because of its socio-cultural and religious position as the origin of some of the world's major religion annually received scores of persons on religious pilgrimages and tourism from all over the world including Nigeria.²⁹ Between 1994 and 1996/1997 alone, Israel hosted about 13, 000 pilgrims from Nigeria; in 1996, about 1,445 pilgrims were in Jerusalem, in 1995 there about 6,975 and in 1994 about 4,590 pilgrims. Various States' Christian Pilgrim Welfare Boards, Office of Pilgrim Affairs (Christian) Abuja and the Nigerian Embassy in Israel often ensure the smooth organization of pilgrim tours to the holy land. Between February 24th and 28th, 1997, the residents of Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria had Jerusalem brought to them in an Israeli cultural programme. The embassy of Israel organized a cultural fair titled, 'Jerusalem from the Air' with the aim of revealing Jerusalem and its beauty to Nigerians who may want to visit the nation. The intent of the cultural fair was also to re-awaken the memories of individuals who had visited already.³⁰

In the field of medicine, a team of Israeli Paediatric Cardiologists from the Wolfson Medical Centre in Tel Aviv signed a bilateral agreement with the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan in 1996. The agreement was code named 'Save a Child Project' and was aimed at fighting congenital heart diseases that have claimed the lives of so many Nigerian children. The project was formally commissioned at the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan by a team led Dr. Amram Cohen, founder and Chief Executive of the foundation in partnership with the Nigerian project coordinator, Dr. Samuel Omokhodion who is a specialist cardiologist at UCH. This agreement implied that Nigerian children who had heart diseases would be transferred to the medical centre in Israel for treatment at a highly reduced cost. About 10 Nigerians have benefitted from the project since its institution in 1996 up to 1998.³¹

In sporting activities, Israel has also attracted some great Nigerian talents to ply their trade in the country. In March 1997 Etim Esin left Nigeria to play for a division 1 team in Israel; Maccabi Haifa. In May of the same year, Chibuike Okeke and Tajudeen Ibrahim of Iwuayanwu Nationale and Shooting Stars of Ibadan respectively left their clubs in Nigeria to play in Israel. In the 1994/1995 football season, Tajudeen Oyekanmi helped his team; Belar Tel Aviv to win the Second Division Championship which led to the team's promotion to the top Israeli league.³² The Babangida administration's engagement with Israel was not without its challenges, as the move was met with criticism from some segments of the Nigerian public and the Arab world. However, the regime's pragmatic approach and its willingness to navigate the delicate political landscape ultimately led to the restoration of diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Israel.

The final major shift in Nigeria-Israel relations in the military dispensation came during the regime of General Sani Abacha, who came to power in 1993 after a military coup that overthrew the interim government of Ernest Shonekan. The Abacha administration, like its predecessors, sought to balance its relations with both the Arab and Israeli worlds, recognizing the potential benefits of maintaining positive ties with both sides. Under Abacha's leadership, Nigeria continued to engage with Israel. The regime's pragmatic approach to foreign policy, which was driven in part by its desire to enhance Nigeria's regional and global influence, led to the strengthening of ties between the two countries. However, the Abacha regime's tenure was marked by widespread human rights abuses, political repression, and a general deterioration of Nigeria's international reputation. This, in turn, complicated the government's efforts to maintain balanced relations with both the Arab and Israeli worlds, as the regime's actions drew widespread international condemnation. Overall, the military dispensation up to 1999 was marked by significant shifts and challenges in the country's relationship with Israel. The different military regimes that ruled during this period adopted a range of approaches, from pro-Arab stances to more pragmatic and balanced policies, reflecting the complex and often turbulent nature of Nigeria-Israel relations during this time.

Conclusion

The relationship between Nigeria and Israel from 1970 to 1999 was marked by both dynamic changes and enduring continuities. The influence of the Arab-Israeli conflict on Nigeria's foreign policy was a key driver of the dynamic nature of the bilateral ties. Nigeria's support for the Palestinian cause in the 1970s led to a cooling of relations with Israel, culminating in the severance of diplomatic ties in 1973. However, this position shifted in the 1980s as Nigeria sought to diversify its international alliances and re-establish ties with Israel. Domestic political changes in both countries also impacted the trajectory of the Nigeria-Israel relationship. The transition to civilian rule in Nigeria and the political upheavals in Israel influenced the countries' foreign policy calculations and their approach to each other.

Despite these dynamic shifts, certain continuities underpinned the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and Israel. Economic and commercial cooperation remained a vital component, as Nigeria's need for Israeli expertise and technology in various sectors sustained the countries' engagement. Additionally, the shared commitment to addressing common challenges, such as the fight against terrorism, contributed to the maintenance of diplomatic and intelligence-sharing channels between Nigeria and Israel. Overall, the Nigeria-Israel relationship from 1970 to 1999 navigated a complex geopolitical landscape, with both dynamic changes and enduring continuities shaping the nature and trajectory of their bilateral ties.

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